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Jordanian Instability: Results of the Syrian Civil War and Implications for US Foreign Policy

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Jordan's proximity to neighboring conflicts in Iraq and Syria exacerbates existing social, economic and political tensions within the country already existent between its majority Palestinian diaspora population and its disproportionately ethnic Jordanian government.

The country is reliant on foreign aid and patronage to address the immediate concerns of its refugee and majority poor populations, although no short-term monetary solution can directly address its inadequate social and physical infrastructure.

Although the U.S. has taken a greater role, both economically and militarily in Jordanian affairs, little has been accomplished to resolve the country's long-term stability concerns. While the resolution of neighboring conflicts in Iraq and Syria would ease Jordan's immediate refugee crisis, persistent high unemployment and a lack of educational opportunities for the country's youth demographic, the regime's monopoly of political power, a deeply entrenched system of corruption and the scarcity of water and energy sources, all pose threats to the major non-NATO ally's stability.

Table of Contents

Professor Bader Al-Madi's fourth floor office looks south over the sprawling University of Jordan campus in northern Amman.

It's July of 2014. As we speak, Islamic State forces are redrawing the map of Iraq and Syria, two countries that share one third of Jordan's borders. Already, they've captured Jordan's umbilical cord to Iraq, seizing the border and cutting off a major highway that accounts for some $1.5 billion in exports, according to the Jordanian Chamber of Industry.

Within the week, pro-ISIS sympathizers will storm the Jordanian government's headquarters in the southern city of Ma'an, veiling the building's bullet-ridden entryway with the black flag of the Islamic State.

By February, Jordan will be fully committed to military operations against the Islamic State. Syrian rebels training in Jordan to fight both ISIS and the Bashar al-Assad regime, join the Kingdom's 67 fighter jets' – largely donated or bought from the U.S.– aerial campaign over Iraq and Syria.

"From what I'm seeing, as an academic, is that things are really not stable," the mid-forties professor of political science says, amid the backdrop of the monochromatic beige of the capital's ubiquitous four story buildings, punctuated by minarets. "Things are really not reflecting a positive view of our future."

Neighboring humanitarian crises – from the Palestinian exodus from Israel in 1948, the flight of Iraqis after the U.S. invasion of 2003 and the high-water mark of sectarian violence there in 2006, to the present-day bedlam in Iraq and Syria – have transformed this largely desert kingdom into a catchment basin for populations fleeing surrounding conflict.

The resource-scarce country's population of 6.5 million has ballooned to over eight million in the past four years, according to the CIA World Factbook and United Nations estimates. Nearly all of that increase stems from Syrian refugees, three-quarters of whom are women and children.

That's straining the social and physical infrastructure in the world's third most arid country. As Al-Madi explains, animosity between Jordanians, refugees and the country's Hashemite monarchy is growing. The increasing cost of living, high unemployment, the regime's monopoly on political power, widespread corruption and water scarcity are eroding this former oasis of stability.

"Why do we keep letting them in is because some people in our government believe we have the obligations to let them in," Al-Madi says. "[I mean] we have not enough to provide ourselves, so why should we allow these people to stay? It's really ridiculous."

Despite his callous tone, Al-Madi and his family have been at the center of the Syrian refugee crisis since the civil war broke out in 2011. His brother Talal, the sheik of his northern village, harbors some 300 Syrians in the homes of local villagers.

While those Syrians belong to the same ethnic tribal group, it's a sense of social and religious obligation that drives Al-Madi's clan's hospitality, echoed by the broader outlook of Jordan's Hashemite monarchy.

But that hospitality is beginning to wear thin. Influxes of refugees in more densely populated areas along the north – most notably in the towns of Mafraq and Irbid– have increased the costs of housing and domestic goods, some of which have risen around 40 percent.

Refugee crises

Since 2011, the population of the Mafraq governorate has doubled, most of them dependent on international aid and subsidies from the UN. Al-Madi says that growth has driven unemployment to its highest recorded rate.

"When they come here, they register with the UN and they receive aid," he says. "So, I say I can work only for ten [Jordanian Dinars] and a refugee says he can work for five JD, so always they will employ these refugees."

Al-Madi says when a Jordanian shopper goes to purchase goods, they now have to account for the inflation caused by international subsidies to an estimated eight percent of the country's population, most of whom are spread along the north or reside in densely-populated urban areas.

The Syrian refugee crisis only serves to compound internal instability, as the traditional bribery and payments system – called Baksheesh – from the Hashemite regime to public figures and tribal leaders, is reallocated to the increasing costs of public services and infrastructure projects.

Electricity and water in Mafraq are shut off at least twice a week, and social services are virtually non-existent. Baksheesh to tribal leaders as a symbol of respect and patronage by the regime has been diverted to additional border security and the city's gendarme.

Mafraq and Irbid were once political strongholds for the Hashemites; until 2010, the cities were some of the few places in the country that ethnic Jordanians outnumbered the predominant Palestinian majority.

"There's a lot of anger, there's madness between the people right now," Al-Madi says. "Jordanian society is saying, 'At what cost have we gained from the Syrian crisis?'"

Aid and living subsidies, while necessary for Jordan's guest population, can only go so far to alleviate the situation. As the refugee population grows, those subsidies are stretched to fewer and fewer Jordanian Dinar per household, as donor fatigue sets in. That means the population of refugees, who are not legally allowed to work, must tighten their belts as the crisis deepens.

Nowhere is the Syrian refugee crisis more visible than in the world's second-largest refugee camp, Zaatari. The camp has grown from a tent-city shaded by olive trees, to a sprawl of anywhere between 90,000 to 140,000 people. As Killian Kleinschmidt, the camp's director says, the United Nation's High Commission on Refugees, which administers to the camp and it's inhabitants, has no idea exactly how many Syrians are living in Zaatari.

"We've had a 110,000 people going back and forth across the border," Kleinschmidt says between giving directions to his driver while he travels from Zaatari to Amman for his weekly briefing with UNHCR staff. "Any time that they can go back they will, as long as their villages are not under attack."

Refugees are beginning to trickle back into Syria from Zaatari, as Free Syrian Army rebels retake the southern Syrian city of Daraa from Bashar al-Assad's forces.

Still, progress in one region of the Civil War is more often than not counter-balanced by losses elsewhere. Islamic State and Al Nusra Front fighters have taken control of the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk, within Damascus. As residents of the 160,000 camp-turned-township flee fighting between rival groups, they're finding

there isn't anywhere else to go; the highway between Damascus and Amman is largely in the hands of regime forces, denying refugees the ability to flee.

UNHCR's task is daunting. As the civil war escalates into its fourth year, with over 200,000 documented deaths and an estimated over 1 million undocumented casualties, even more are still displaced, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

"Still, out of these millions of people that are in trouble right now, there's about a 10 million in need of humanitarian assistance right now," Kleinschmidt says. "We're recognizing that they're going to be staying longer than six months. Many of the other crises disappear over a few months, but we understood in the middle of [2013] that this is going to be a medium-length conflict."

That assessment changed the way UNHCR structures its response. Now, the organization is working towards promoting stability and establishing permanent residences for the refugees from Syria. Where there was a tent-city in 2011, now there are semi-permanent trailers with women and children given preference in housing, due to their vulnerability.

"The camp is now moving into the direction of regularizing the shops," Kleinschmidt says, speaking about the small businesses being run out of trailers and in the tented marketplace along Zaatari's main dust-hewn road.

"Regularization is the most important part right now," Kleinschmidt says.

Still, there isn't enough to go around. The Mafraq governorate, just kilometers from Syrian-Jordanian border, has been completely engulfed by the humanitarian crisis.

"The schools are overwhelmed, there's very little room in the clinics and of course you will get protests and questioning," Kleinschmidt says. "The local people are asking the government to do more for them… it's a little exploited by some of them to put pressure on the government, using the presence of refugees as a lever for development."

'Guest' Status

This most recent population explosion was preluded by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the escalation of sectarian violence within that country in 2006, which drove an estimated one million Iraqis into Jordan to escape sectarian violence at home. Just as with the Syrian civil war and its victims, the Jordanian government at the time refused to acknowledge the Iraqis as refugees.

"Specifically, Jordan is not a party to the international refugee convention," says Denise Gilman, an expert on immigration and human rights law at the University of Texas. "It doesn't have the same legal obligations as Turkey, the only country in the region that has signed on to the Refugee Convention."

Jordan's non-signatory status, mean Iraqis at the time were considered 'guests of the monarchy,' and only nominally considered 'refugees' by Jordan's Ministry of Interior.

"Part of what is affecting the Jordanian government's response is the ongoing burden and difficulty of maintaining order," Gilman says. "Certainly the Palestinian experience causes the government to be a little more cautious about the present situation."

Palestinian refugees to the country have largely assimilated into Jordanian society, but are still kept out of key positions in the government posts and in the military. Estimates vary, but overwhelmingly agree that ethnic Palestinians comprise the majority of Jordanian citizens.

Kept from the public political sphere – especially after Jordan's 1970 crackdown on Palestinian guerilla groups operating within the country to strike at neighboring Israel – Palestinians within the country have largely turned to the private sector.

While the Syrian and Iraqi 'guests' of the monarchy are not legally allowed to work, Kleinschmidt says that many of them have joined the black market workforce.

"Of course they work, they just work illegally and for far less because of it," Kleinschmidt says.

Understandably hesitant, given the country's well-funded and pervasive security apparatus, Al-Madi says that governmental corruption may also be driving the regime's benefaction toward refugee populations. He says one of the reasons Jordan continues to host refugees is because it affords officials the opportunity to skim aid allocations for themselves.

"Of course, there are sections, certain officials, that do not want to see this aid stopped," Al-Madi says. "There's a lot of money that doesn't necessarily go to the refugees, and at that, I cannot say more."

Speaking out against the monarchy, and especially "defamation of the His Majesty King Abdullah II," is still a crime against the state in Jordan.

Sectarian fault lines along ethnic, political and religious strata are widening. An unemployment rate well over 20 percent and the ever-upward cost of social services are draining the country's already limited financial capabilities, which are increasingly dependent on international aid.

The country's demography doesn't bode well either. Fifty-six percent of Jordan's population is under the age of 25, with the fastest growing age group under 15. The country's population growth rate is fourth in the world, behind Lebanon, Zimbabwe and South Sudan, according to CIA World Factbook estimates. That means the stresses on infrastructure will only increase in the coming years.

Water Scarcity

After five years of drought and the worst rainy season in decades, the discovery and exploitation of an ancient aquifer in 2014 has brought only temporary relief.

The influx of refugees has only served to exacerbate the country's water crisis. Zaatari refugee camp, the second largest refugee camp in the world and the largest Syrian camp in Jordan, uses over one million liters of water every day. Leading to widespread animosity between Jordanians and the Hashemite regime that has allowed its border to remain open to refugees.

But Yousef Mansour, the former head of Jordan's Agency for Economic Development, turned consultant, says while broader Jordanian society may point the finger at the refugee crisis for their current woes, that blame is misplaced.

"Don't fall into the trap and think that refugees are people that live at subsistence, they live below you and I," Mansour says from his penthouse office in downtown

Amman. “You can’t allocate the consumption rate of Jordanians to Syrians. For instance, it’s estimated that they use one sixth of the water Jordanians use.”

The Kingdom has been forced to ration its water consumption, with tankers delivering household allocations to sheet metal rooftop storage tanks once a week. Pipes across the country’s urban areas, where over 80 percent of the population lives, have mostly been shut off. Still, Amman’s neighborhood streets are wet at least once a week, as shop owners cleans windows and storefronts of built up dust and exhaust, and leaky pipes spill water out of apartment buildings.

The Jordan River, which forms the Kingdom’s western boundary with Israel and the West Bank, and after which the country was named by it’s former British overlords, is little more than a stagnant creek. The Dead Sea, at the Jordan River’s terminus, is evaporating at a rate of one meter every year.

Water is now a national security issue in Jordan. The Kingdom is allocating 10 percent of its GDP to the construction of a canal from its 16 miles of ocean access with the Red Sea in the south, to the Dead Sea. The Red-Dead Canal project is also sponsored by the World Bank and was originally planned as a joint-project with Israel, although political deadlock has since derailed Israeli investment in the project.

It’s a desperate gamble by the regime to desalinate ocean water and provide hydroelectric power to a country that imports the vast majority of its energy from oil-rich neighbors like Saudi Arabia.

“We import over 90 percent of our energy, so that’s very expensive and it’s unsustainable,” Al-Madi says. “We cannot afford to keep going like this – something has got to change, and believe me, something will eventually change.”

Corruption

Mansour says Jordan's ability to cope with the ongoing infrastructural demand is dependent on foreign aid from the UN, loans from economic organizations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and economic aid from private organizations, particularly the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Still, that aid only goes so far.

"The refugees are still poor, they're concentrated in urban areas and they can't afford rent," Mansour says.

Economic assistance to the country places stipulations on its expenditure. For much of the World Bank and IMF's funding, contractual agreements between lenders and the Jordanian government directs aid to the infrastructural necessities of refugee populations, referred to as 'technical assistance.'

Mansour says that technical assistance is often the last to get to refugee populations because it's more difficult for the regime to meet the contractual obligations placed on it by lenders.

"In Jordan, if it's technical assistance, it doesn't get spent. If it's assistance that goes into projects – aid that goes directly into a government budget – then there's no problem spending it," Mansour says.

"There are attempts by USAID to help with the Syrian refugees, and these attempts are constrained by an attitude that asks how to get Syrians to benefits from USAID, while benefiting Jordan," Mansour says.

Mansour says the refugees are being used political and economic leverage by those in the government who allocate aid.

"The whole issue of the cost of the refugees to Jordan is maligned – they're being used as an issue."

The UN and the World Food Program estimates that over $800 million in aid allocations go to Jordan's refugee populations every year, including allocations to the 12 extent Palestinian refugee camps that have grown into townships near major metropolitan areas, administrated to by the UN's Relief Works Agency.

Mansour says Jordan's refugee crises are used by bureaucrats within the Ministry of Interior and other government agencies to hold out for additional funding from the international community. That practice goes back to the Iraqi refugee crisis of the 2000s, when the government allegedly exaggerated the numbers of Iraqi refugees dependent on foreign aid, in an effort to increase international aid contributions, particularly those from the United States.

Many Iraqi families that were economically well off when they immigrated to Jordan went destitute within years of their arrival because Jordan's 'guest status' prohibited them from attaining jobs, while less fortunate families were quickly forced to return to war-torn Iraq once their aid allocations had been met.

Since 1951, the U.S. has given over $9 billion in non-military loans and grants to the Hashemite regime, but the Jordanian government's lack of transparency makes any estimate of that aid's actual distribution extremely difficult. Estimates of governmental corruption and the misallocation of aid vary from the hundreds of millions of dollars to billions lost or 'misallocated.'

Still, a memorandum of understanding between the regime and the State Department in 2008 heralded an increase in aid allocations from the U.S. to Jordan. In the

past two years, the U.S. announced two separate loan guarantees to the country, effectively allowing the country to borrow and default on it's obligations to the IMF and World Bank in order to receive additional aid, without having to reimburse international agencies.

Despite U.S. political support, patronage and subsidies, Jordanian public opinion of the U.S. is at its lowest since the 2003 invasion of neighboring Iraq.

"The only study that's worth estimating the cost and worthy of analysis, is the one done recently by USAID Project Fiscal Reform Team," Mansour says. That conservative report, estimates around 300 million Jordanian Dinars or $450 million of misallocated funds to have taken place within a five-year audit.

"It's really sad that Jordan does this, but it's not a plot," Mansour says. "It's kind of a ploy to get more funding, and it's news and because the Jordanian government makes them publish what they tell them."

Jordan ranked 141 of 180 countries on Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index in 2014.

To skeptics like Mansour, governmental 'crackdowns' on corruption amount to a show for the international community and Western donors; they're a bid to satisfy critics and the larger aid community into reinvesting in a country that simply will not survive without their money.

Security apparatus

In a government 'crackdown' on corruption in 2012, designed to satisfy international agencies that the regime was taking threats of aid reductions seriously, and

to preempt internal threats of an Arab Spring-styled overthrow of the monarchy, King Abdullah II dissolved two consecutive parliaments and began prosecuting government officials on graft charges.

That included the sentencing of the Prime Minister's brother, the head of the General Intelligence Directorate, Muhammad Dahabi. The regime's subsequent prosecution of Dahabi, one month after the dissolution of parliament, on an estimated $30 million embezzlement and misuse of security allocated funds, while unprecedented, did little to quiet internal dissidents and roused the ire of the U.S. intelligence community.

Widely considered among the regions best intelligence agencies, Al-Mukhabarat, or "the Directorate," has a long history of cooperation with U.S. intelligence services, including the sharing of information regarding terrorist plots against western hotels in the Balkans in 1999, and warnings of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Jordan's ethnic diversity, due in part to regional instability, also makes it a center for extremism within the region, despite boasting what is arguably the best intelligence-security agency in the Middle East outside of Israel's Mossad. The country is often an ideological incubator for terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, which later developed into ISIS.

But critics of the regime blame the Mukhabarat and police forces throughout the country for the forced disappearances of dissidents and for putting pressure on ideological opponents of the regime.

Governmental corruption and the consolidation of power by the Hashemite monarchy is one of the largest platforms for opposition parties within Jordan's parliamentary monarchy. Tensions between the government and the largest opposition

party, the Islamic Action Front, which were increasing, came to a head this spring, when a political coup within opposition leadership led to the appointment of moderate officials critics say are more in-line with the government's agenda.

The political coup within opposition parties has exacerbated concerns among political scientists within the country that the regime is working towards a consolidation of power, in light of mounting internal and external pressures. According to Al-Madi, officials within the government have been pushing for a violent roundup of IAF members, whose organization is closely related to Egypt's exiled Muslim Brotherhood.

"My fear, my concern, is if our government followed the model of Egypt in dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood," Al-Madi said. "I think it's going to be a disaster for the stability of Jordan."

"Some people within the government, and some writers, they're trying to push the government and the regime to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood like what happened with Egypt, also some of our Gulf allies are also pushing us to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood."

Operation Inherent Resolve

Following the execution of Jordanian and American nationals, including the execution-by-fire of a Jordanian Air Force pilot, Jordan's retaliatory executions of militants and subsequent increase in its air campaign, seems to have impressed State Department and Department of Defense officials in Washington.

In February, the Obama administration announced it would give Jordan $1 billion per year for the next three years in military aid, boosting by more than half it's current aid

package. Institute of War consultant Isabel Nassief says the Department of Defense and the Mukhabarat have been working together for years to supply arms and training in Jordan to rebel groups fighting in Syria, including anti-tank missile systems.

"The joint-operations room is supplying TOW missiles to about ten different groups operating in Syria," Nassief says. "Almost all of that is coming across the border from Jordan."

Nassief says the Defense Department has been finding other ways to garner additional supplies for Jordanian defense forces and their proxies. In every year since 2011, joint exercises Eager Lion has deployed increasing numbers of U.S. troops and combat equipment to the Kingdom.

While the Pentagon says those training missions are meant to increase cohesion between Jordanian and U.S. forces, Nassief says their effect is the supplying of Jordan's army with additional weaponry.

"Our sort of quick-read on it was that it was a way to bring over a lot of equipment and leave it all behind."

The Pentagon could not be reached for comment on the leaving behind of military hardware during the Eager Lion exercises. On it's website, U.S. Central Command states the importance of joint operations in supporting the "interoperability of Jordanian and participating militaries."

The U.S. began its own military operations against the Islamic State on August 8, 2014, which the DOD estimates to have cost over $1.8 billion alone. That puts the price tag per target for Operation Inherent Resolve, well over $300,000, and the price tag per day at $8.5 million, according to the Pentagon.

The problems facing Jordan are not soon to disappear. An overhaul of the political system, resulting from the increased pressures of the Arab Spring, has been delayed by nationalistic rhetoric and propaganda, after ISIS' execution-by-fire of airman Muath al-Kasasbeh.

Conclusion

Jordan's economic woes are not likely to disappear. High unemployment, especially within the country's youngest demographic, is a persistent concern to internal stability, and little encouragement exists within the government to invest in industry while aid allocations may still be skimmed from.

The country's lack of water is arguably the most immediate threat to the country's internal stability. While the Red-Dead Canal is slated to begin construction in 2016, full funding of the project has yet to be allocated. Desalinization itself is an energy-intensive process, one that remains problematic for a country that imports the vast majority of its energy.

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